DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 701 HE 027 586

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TITLE Building Community in the Freshman and Senior Year Experiences: Completing the Cycle of Student-Institution Involvement.
PUB DATE 21 Jul 94
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on the First Year Experience (Dublin, Ireland, July 21, 1994).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen; *College Seniors; College Students; Educational Experience; Higher Education; Intervention; Models; Socialization; *Student College Relationship; Student Experience
IDENTIFIERS Learning Environment; Transition Management; *University of Maryland College Park

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concepts, and highlights the similarities, of the freshman and senior year experiences, applies these to theoretical transition and socialization models, discusses frameworks, and presents enhancement interventions. A section on freshman and senior year experiences looks at the common focus currently on the entering student experience and the common neglect of the final year student experience. This section also points out several similarities between the freshman and senior year experiences. A section on transitions which are common to both the freshman and senior years, offers a theoretical explanation of the transition and socialization processes. A section on programmatic themes discusses development of a sense of institutional community and work at the University of Maryland at College Park on enhancing the senior year experience. A section on intentional interventions looks at efforts at the University of Maryland at College Park. A final section details some institutional benefits to focusing on freshman and senior year experiences. Appended are a list comparing the freshman and senior year experiences, six principles of community, and a figure showing a framework for conceptualizing the senior experience. Contains 38 references. (JB)

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Building Community in the Freshman and Senior Year Experiences: Completing the Cycle of Student-Institution Involvement

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International Conference on the First Year Experience
Dublin, Ireland
21 July, 1994

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"The memory of moving out of my parent's house and into my dorm room at age 18 is a day that will live forever in my mind -- frankly because it was one of the most exciting times of my life. So why is it that I, a soon-to-be college graduate, along with many others, am finding myself on my knees at my parents doorstep, begging to be let back in?...I should be relishing my independence, eager to face the world on my own, to survive and succeed." -- A University of Maryland at College Park senior.

The late teens and early twenties are a time when individuals experience many transitions and crises (Chickering, 1969; Pats, 1987, Schlossberg, 1981). The undergraduate collegiate experience should include a series of changes and transitions which influence students' growth and development beginning in their freshmen year and continuing though to graduation (Astin, 1993; Chickering, 1969; Karr & Mather, 1972). As the above quotation indicates, two of the most salient and turbulent transitions occur during the freshmen year when students enter the institution (Boyer, 1987; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989), and then again during their senior year, when students graduate and leave the university (Feitler-Karchin & Wallace-Schutzman, 1982; Holton, 1993; Karr & Mahrer, 1972).

"If [the senior year experience is] combined with a meaningful freshman year experience, the two may serve to anchor the undergraduate experience with symmetrical support at both ends of the college transition -- thus ensuring that students get it both 'coming and going'" (Curseo, 1993).

As freshmen and seniors face their transitions and redefine themselves socially, personally, and educationally or professionally, developing a strong campus community can be beneficial to them. Colleges and universities will additionally benefit by enhancing student undergraduate experiences and creating stronger student-institution ties. In turn, these stronger ties will eventually enhance alumni-college alliances in which alumni may become effective informal recruiters, outspoken supporters, and future

generous donors (Cuseo, 1993).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the concepts, and highlight the similarities, of the freshman and senior year experiences, apply these experiences to theoretical transition and socialization models, discuss two programmatic frameworks, and present interventions to enhance the freshman and senior year experiences.

The experiences of students in this paper are of traditional college age (18 - 23 years old). Students who do not fit the traditional student profile may share some characteristics of their freshman and senior experiences with these students, but they may also face some significant differences. Another overview might be noteworthy to explore and compare the experiences of these different populations but that is not done here.

The Freshman and Senior Year Experiences

Some educators feel that the freshman year contains the most critical transition students face during their adolescent and early adult life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Gardner (1986) suggests that the freshman year is the foundation on which the rest of an individual's college experience is based. Because this is a crucial period when students have many often conflicting experiences, Levitz and Noel (1989) say that the most significant intervention an institution can make in the name of student success is focusing on the freshman year. A comprehensive freshman year experience program should be a deliberate attempt to "provide a rite of passage in which students are supported, welcomed, celebrated and ultimately (hopefully) assimilated" (p. 266, Gardner, 1986).

Even though a large number of colleges and universities have invested in the

concepts of the freshman year experience, they have been slow to acknowledge and address the problems associated with the senior year (Weinberg, 1988). Researchers spend a significant amount of time and energy studying entering students, but after the first year interest seems to drop off and little attention is paid to the leaving process (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989). As long as three decades ago researchers identified the senior year as one of contention -- Chickering (1969) found a cluster of upsetting problems in the final year and Sanford (1967) saw a high level of instability during students' final semesters. Institutions are just now beginning to look at seniors beyond traditional career development issues (Magner, 1990).

Still, the freshman and senior year experiences contain numerous similarities. The similarities can be categorized into three main themes which include student concerns and changes in their experiences as they leave an old environment and enter a new one, difficulty with transitions which frequently leads to high rates of attrition, and the need to learn new skills to succeed.

During the freshmen transition students face changes in their living arrangements, and social networks and supports (Johnson & Statton, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), as well as increases in their levels of stress (Palladino & Tryon, 1978). They say good-bye to a life once familiar (Vickio, 1990) and enter one unknown in which they need to unlearn their past attitudes, values and behaviors while learning new ones (Feldman and Newcomb, 1969 as cited in Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Seniors share similar experiences as they face losses and changes such as in the types of relationships and social supports, in the degrees of comfort and familiarity, in levels of influence, and

in a sense of youthfulness (Brammer & Abbrego, 1981; Bradley-Sagen, Lundak & Peterson, 1990, Vickio, 1990), as well as increases in stress accompanying the transition into a new work site (Louis, 1980).

Additional similarities between these two populations are reflected in the concerns of freshman and seniors. In one study (Jorgensen-Earp & Staton, 1993), researchers found that new students were concerned with being in a new environment and facing new experiences, as well as coping with competition and low prestige. They additionally experienced feelings of pressure and confusion, as well as being lost, beginner-like, and overwhelmed. In studies of seniors, other researchers found seniors to be anxious, fearful and excited about entering the workforce, while they additionally were concerned with competency communication abilities, competition, and their ability to develop relationships (Feitler-Karchin & Wallace-Schutzman, 1982). A different study found that seniors were concerned with feeling like a beginner and adjusting to a new schedule, while some graduates had trouble learning office politics, making friends and translating theory into practice, while other graduates had difficulty with moving and financial planning (Martinez, Sedlacek, & Bruchhuber, 1987).

Both of these periods also share high levels of attrition in which new students leave their universities and new employees leave their first jobs. Many students make up their minds to leave their new institutions during their first semester (Gardner, 1986), and a high number of new graduates leave their jobs within a short time of being hired (Hatcher & Cook, 1988; Louis, 1980). Reasons for new students to leave their institutions include academic boredom, a sense of irrelevancy, limited or unrealistic

expectations, academic underpreparedness, discipline or career indecision, environmental dissonance or institutional incompatibility and difficulty adjusting to the transition (Levitz & Noel, 1989). As for recent graduates, newcomers inabilities to cope with new stressful situations, dissatisfaction with the job, disillusionment with the position or organization, and difficulty with personal transitions account for much of first job attrition (Fisher, 1985; Latack, 1984; Louis, 1980).

Researchers additionally suggest that both freshman and seniors need to learn new skills to succeed in their new environments. New students need to develop awareness and knowledge of institutional resources, learn effective writing and communication skills, gain insight into acceptable student behavior, develop in personal, academic and career areas (Gordon, 1989), and learn important academic survival skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Seniors also need to acquire new skills which in many ways parallel those of new students. To be successful in the workplace new hires need to learn appropriate behaviors, recognize unwritten expectations, become familiar with the informal company structures and methods, be accepted as a team member, and learn to effectively communicate, as well as be able to adapt and earn respect (Burdick & Mitchell, 1993; Holton, 1993).

Both the freshman and senior year experiences have various indicators of success. For the freshman year experience objectives include: 1) developing academic and intellectual competence; 2) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; 3) developing identity; 4) deciding on a career and life-style; 5) maintaining personal health and wellness; 6) developing an integrated philosophy of life (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Success in the senior experience includes: 1) promoting the coherence and relevance of general education; 2) promoting integration and synthesis within the academic major; 3) explicitly and intentionally developing specific skills, competencies and perspectives; 4) enhancing students' career and professional development; 5) promoting effective life-planning and decision-making abilities (Cuseo, 1993).

Transitions

One of the main reasons the freshman and senior experiences are upsetting and difficult is because students are undergoing tremendous transitions. When investigating the freshman and senior year experiences, a theoretical understanding of transitions and socialization is important.

Schlossberg (1981) defines transitions as "an event or non-event which result in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships (p.5)." Her theoretical framework contains three postulates important in understanding transitions: 1) the individual's perceptions of the particular transition, 2) the characteristics of pre-transitional and post-transitional environments, and 3) the characteristics of the individual undergoing the transition. In addition, Schlossberg identifies different factors which influence these postulates. Factors important for understanding the first postulate, individual's perceptions, include role change, positive or negative affect, internal or external sources, gradual or sudden onset, permanent, temporary or uncertain duration and degree of stress. Factors important in understanding pre-transitional and post-transitional environments, the

second postulate, include interpersonal support systems, institutional supports, and the physical setting. Factors important in understanding individual characteristics, the third postulate, include psychosocial competence, sex and sex-role identity, age or life stage, state of health, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, values orientation, and previous experience with similar transitions.

Schlossberg's model is very applicable to both the freshman transition and the senior transition. For example, the environmental component of her framework, and its factors of interpersonal support systems, institutional supports and physical setting, all undergo significant changes for both incoming students and recent graduates. Incoming students face changes in their physical settings when they enter an environment in which they have little understanding (Banning, 1989). They say good-bye to their social supports from high school (Vickio, 1990), and enter a new institution with its own intentionally designed services, courses and programs (Magner, 1990; Upcraft & Farnsworth, 1984). Graduating students, when they leave their institutions and enter the world of work, face a shift in social supports (Esperon, 1986), leave a readily available network of peers, and enter a more heterogenous environment (Bradley-Sagen, Lundak & Peterson, 1990) which is physically and culturally different (Holton, 1993).

Another transition model, comprised of three phases, can also be used to understand the transitions of new and graduating students. Bridges' (1980) model begins with endings. He says that individuals first need to complete their current situation before they can have a successful transition into a new situation. They go though endings in four ways - disengagement, disidentification, disenchancement, and

disorientation. The second stage of his model is the neutral zone. In this phase, the old no longer appeals but the new has not fully developed, and individuals tend to feel lost and unfocused. This is a period of exploration and searching. The final stage, the beginning, usually occurs when an event or change allows individuals to redefine themselves, their environments, and their roles. Bridges suggests that this beginning is actually the end of the transition.

Again, this model is very applicable to students entering the university as well as those leaving it. Both groups of students go though endings when they need to say good-bye to the old creating an opportunity an intentional intervention (Vickio, 1990). Then, when they enter the new environment, either the university or the workplace, both new students and new hires do not know what they want, where they are headed, or what will happen (Louis, 1980; Jorgensen-Earp & Staton, 1993)-- the neutral zone. This is a crucial time for new students because success is largely determined during the first year (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985 as cited in Upcraft & Gardner, 1989) and for new graduates as indicated by the high attrition rate of new hires within the first 18 months of employment (Holton, 1993; Louis, 1980). Finally, the beginning phase, or the end of the transition, is when the new hires or new students are securely into their new environments and are being successful.

In addition to transition models, another type of framework important to understanding the freshman and senior year experiences are socialization models. Socialization is the process in which outsiders become fully functioning members of an organization (Fisher, 1985). It is an organizational transition model. There are

numerous models, but Fisher (1985) suggests that most include three similar stages. The first stage, anticipatory socialization, is when individuals gather information and develop expectations. The second stage, entry, is a discovery point when an individual learns what really occurs within an organization and often refutes expectations which lead to a "reality shock" (p. 5, Fisher, 1985). The final stage is the adjustment to organizational reality.

This model is also appropriate to examine the two major transitions college students face. Anticipatory socialization occurs for new students during the admissions and orientation process (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) when students begin to form their early expectations about college. For graduating seniors this occurs when students begin their career search, frequently in the university career center (Bradley-Sagen, Lundak & Peterson, 1990). The entry stage is the period when the individuals actually enter their new environments. As mentioned previously, a critical time for both new students (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985 as cited in Upcraft & Gardner, 1989), and recent graduates (Holton, 1993, Louis, 1980) as many leave their new organizations. The final stage, adjustment is when individuals are (hopefully) fully functioning in their new organizations.

Programmatic Themes

The idea of community is important at every college. Few would argue against the positive impact that a strong community can have on individual institutions. Yet with the diversity of today's students, the complexity of the institution, and its size and

structure, as well as often times competing goals, the institutions themselves are more prone to create and support subcommunities which can conflict rather than campus-wide communities which can enrich (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990). In 1990, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching released a report calling for colleges and universities to strengthen their campus communities. Within this report, they identified six principles which lead to an ideal campus community:

> An educationally **purposeful community**, a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on the campus.
> An **open community**, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed.
> A **just community**, a place where the sacredness of the person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued.
> A **disciplined community**, a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good.
> A **caring community**, a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged.
> A **celebrative community**, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared.

The principles put forth above are intended to be a "formula for day-to-day decision making" (p. 7, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990), but they can also be used as a programmatic structure from which to develop programs and services for new students.

In addition to the principles outlined above, another framework can be followed which focuses on developing community within the senior year and extending that sense of community to alumni. This framework was developed as part of a campus-wide initiative, the Senior Experience Task Force, to enhance the senior experience at the

University of Maryland at College Park. The framework was developed as part of the Task Force report and based upon the findings of four research projects (Van der Veer, Eckel, & Weir, 1994). It includes 13 components which are: 1) capstone experiences within the major; 2) courses which link the major and liberal arts; 3) opportunities for reflection and closure; 4) preparation for a global/diverse society; 5) senior specific publications and information; 6) leadership education as an intentional outcome; 7) alumni development; 8) research and assessment; 9) life-skills preparation; 10) preparation for graduate school; 11) career/job search preparation; 12) transitions and rituals; 13) community building within the graduating class.

Intentional Interventions

Below is an example of a freshman orientation seminar from the University of Maryland at College Park which use the six principles of community as programmatic outlines and which address the needs of freshmen. Following that example is an application of the framework for the senior experience with examples of various programs and services.

The University of Maryland at College Park is the flagship institution of the University of Maryland system. Approximately 27,000 undergraduates attend the land-grant institution which is located in a suburban setting nine miles from the heart of Washington DC.

Incoming students are offered the opportunity to participate in a one-credit freshman orientation seminar (EDCP 108-O) coordinated by the Orientation Office.

Sections of the course are available to students in either general formats or those created for special subpopulations of students (i.e. engineering students, commuter students and African-American students), who also have the option of taking a general section. Instructors include faculty, student affairs staff, academic administrators, and senior level administrators who are given flexibility in creating their sections. Because of this freedom, the course can be developed to encompass the concept of community in the first year.

The six principles of community, as outlined by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, provided an outline for one of the sections which has been taught at UMCP. The syllabus for this section was divided into six components representing each of the six principles. Under each principle, various topics were identified which would benefit students and assist in them in learning about and appreciating their new community. For a *purposeful community*, topics such as academic life and purpose, study skills, goal setting, and time management were discussed. Under *open community*, assertiveness skills, and speaking skills were presented. A *just community* included issues of diversity, identify development, and personality type assessments. A *disciplined community* included decision making skills, values and ethics, alcohol and drug use and abuse, campus conduct codes, academic planning and campus safety. *Caring community* topics consisted of communication skills, conflict resolution and problem solving skills, and campus involvement opportunities. The final principle, *celebrative community*, consisted of campus events and traditions, as well as the mission and goals of the university. In addition to the class discussions, the assignments for the

course additionally focused on community.

The senior experience is most likely to be enhanced through numerous interventions. Unlike the freshman seminar, there is no one comprehensive avenue to create community within the senior year. Senior capstone courses are not parallel versions of freshman seminars, even though some liberal arts institutions have one capstone for all seniors. At this research institution, capstones are discipline specific and faculty feel they are not appropriate or feasible for all fields.

Some examples of programs or services for the themes include the following: professional seminars within different majors as *capstone experiences*; senior projects/theses which *link the liberal arts and the major*; senior audits as an example of *reflection and closure*; the graduation handbook as *senior specific information*; *intentional leadership development* includes various leadership courses for graduating seniors; afternoon teas/coffee breaks with students and faculty as an example of *community building*; receptions for seniors at the president's house for *alumni development*; graduating students' award luncheon as a *transition ceremony*; various career and graduate school workshops as *preparation for graduate school* or *career search*; transition workshops as a means to assist students with *life after college*; lectures which focus on diversity in the workplace to *prepare students for a global society*; and alumni surveys as a means to *conduct research and assessment*.

Institutional Benefits

Focusing on the freshman and senior year experiences can help improve an

institution and contribute to the development of a quality experience for undergraduates. By creating freshman year programs and services institutions can benefit through a forced focus on academic advising and orientation, faculty development, and classroom teaching and outcomes, as well as reforming or expanding the undergraduate curriculum, and creating early warning systems for improving retention (Gardner, 1986). In addition, a senior year experience program can benefit an institution through bettering college-business relations, improving alumni relations, promoting faculty development, forging alliances between academic and student affairs, and enhancing institutional research and student outcomes assessment (Curseo, 1993).

Both the freshman and senior years are times of disruption, change, and transitions. Institutions should take advantage of these "windows of opportunity" (p. 66, Levitz & Noel, 1989) to develop intentional interventions. The colleges and universities which create the best environments to assist in these periods will benefit from their efforts in numerous ways (Baade & Sundberg, 1993; Gardner, 1986).

Comparison of the Freshman and Senior Year Experiences

Freshman Experiences	Senior Experiences
Concerns and Changes	
Living Arrangements	Comfort& Familiarity
Social Networks & Supports	Types of Relationships/Supports
Increased Stress	Levels of Influence
New Attitudes, Values, Behaviors	Sense of Youthfulness
	Increased Stress
New Environment	Anxious
New Experiences	Fearful
Competition	Excited
Low Prestige	Competency
Pressure	Communication Abilities
Confusion	Competition
Being Lost	Relationship Development
Beginner-like	Beginner
Overwhelmed	New Schedule Adjustments
	Learning Office Politics
	Making Friends
	Theory to Practice
	Moving
	Financial Planning
(Johnson & Statton, 1990; Jorgensen-Earp & Staton, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Palladino & Tryon, 1978; Vickio, 1990; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969)	(Brammer & Abbrego, 1981; Bradley-Sagen, Lundak & Peterson, 1990; Feitler-Karchin & Wallace-Schutzman, 1982; Martinez, Sedlacek & Bruchhuber, 1987; Louis, 1980; Vickio, 1990)

Comparision of the Freshman and Senior Year Experiences

Freshman Experiences	Senior Experiences
Attrition	
Academic Boredom Sense of Irrelevancy Limited/Unrealistic Expectations Underpreparedness Discipline/Career Indecision Institutional Incompatibility Difficulty Adjusting	Inabilities to Cope Dissatisfaction with Job Organization Disillusionment Difficult Personal Transition
(Levitz & Noel, 1989)	(Fisher, 1985; Latack, 1984; Louis, 1980)
New Skills	
Knowledge Inst. Resources Effective Communication Skills Acceptable Behavior Personal/Academic Development Academic Survival Skills	Appropriate Behaviors Unwritten Expectations Informal Org. Structures Accepted Team Member Effective Communication Adapt Earn Respect
(Gordon, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991)	(Burdick & Mitchell, 1993; Holton, 1993)
Indicators of Success	
Acad/Intellectual Competence Interpersonal Relationships Identity Development Career/Life-style Choices Health and Wellness Life Philosophy	Coherence/Relevance of Gen Ed Synthesis within Major Specific Skill Development Career/Professional Development Life-Planning/Decision-Making
(Upcraft & Gardner, 1989)	(Cuseo, 1993)

6 Principles of Community
(Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990)

An educationally purposeful community, a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on the campus.

An open community, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed.

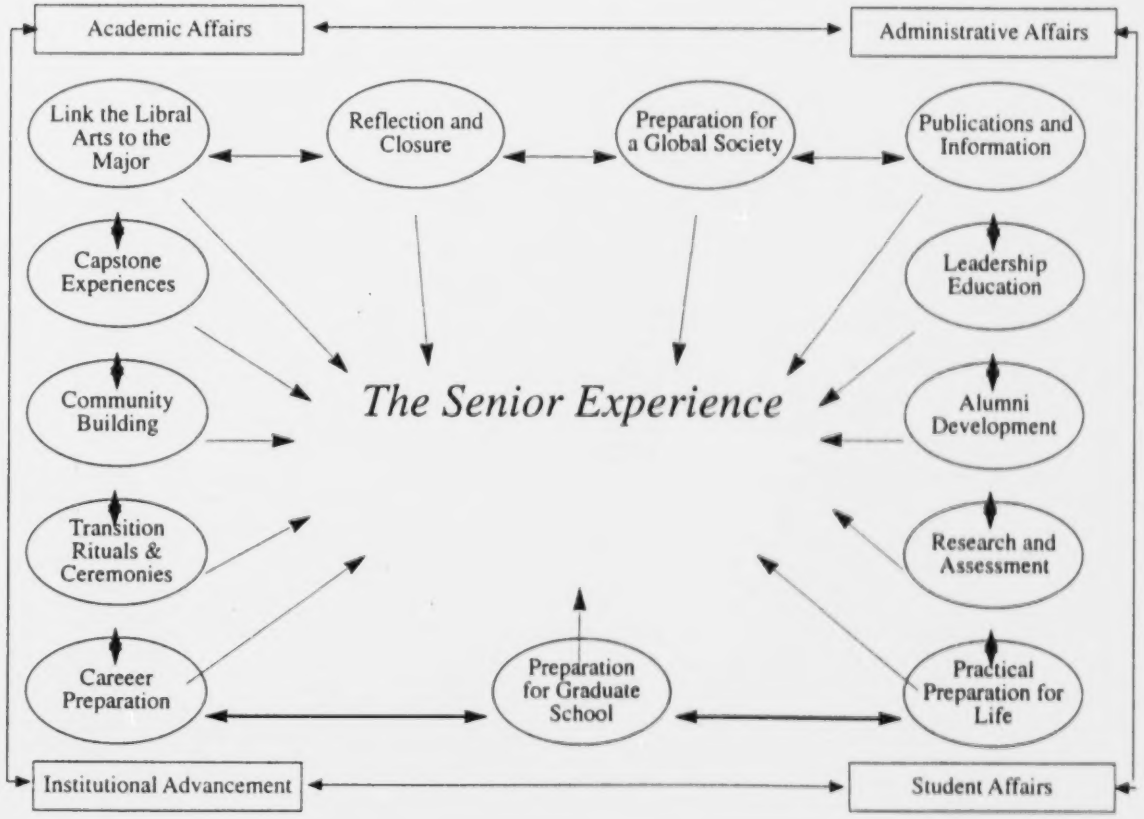
A just community, a place where the sacredness of the person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued.

A disciplined community, a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good.

A caring community, a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged.

A celebrative community, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONCEPTUALIZING THE SENIOR EXPERIENCE AT COLLEGE PARK



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